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ORATION

COMMEMORATIVE

OF

THE LIFE AND SERVICES

OF

CHARLES SUMNER,

PRONOUNCED BEFORE

THE SUMNER LITERARY DEBATING SOCIETY OF
STRAIGHT UNIVERSITY,

BY

EDWARD C. BILLINGS,

AT

NEW ORLEANS, LA.,

JUNE 12, A. D. 1874.

"Quidquid ex Agricola amavimus, quidquid mirati sumus, manet mansurumque est in
animis hominum, in æternitate temporum, fama rerum."

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MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN OF THE
SUMNER LITERARY DEBATING SOCIETY,
OF THE STRAIGHT UNIVERSITY :

History has been described by the most brilliant of modern historians to be "philosophy teaching by example." This is especially true of Biography. For in the life of an individual there is an attractiveness and a warmth which do not belong to events scattered over Empires and running through eras. It is part of God's economy that men truly great should be sources of influence for all time, inspiring in the minds of youth impulses for great exploits and quickening manhood and even age with admiration when emulation has ceased to be possible. He, who studies the steps by which great power over self and over others was attained learns quickest the secret of attaining great power for himself. He, who turns his attention to the career of those who have put into their lives least of self and much of philanthropy, will be readily drawn into a life of self abnegation and resolute bravery in adherence to the right. Thus examples of goodness come to have not only the form and force of precepts but they have the cadence and rythm and harmony of poems. They proclaim virtue and illustrate its possibility, its beauty and its sure and great reward.

Your wish, therefore, that the life and achievements of Charles Sumner should be put before you was not

only a most merited tribute to his memory, but was most wise, since in your types and models and ideals of manhood his overshadowing excellence should have prominent place.

For who more than he sympathized with the aspirations of youth, the kindly incentives of learning—above all who sympathized more ardently than he with those of you who are struggling with the peculiar embarrassments springing from the prejudices against race? Who more loyal than he to all the rights of man, as man, independent of all distinctions arising from the accidents of birth? Who more responsive than he to the protests of all whose rights were denied or fettered? There is, then, a peculiar fitness in our considering his great qualities and noble deeds, here, in the midst of a community, a large portion of which it was the labor of his life to emancipate and disenthral and, in an institution, where, in accordance with the sympathies of his whole nature and the efforts of his whole soul, knowledge is, at last, unveiled, to those from whom it had been so long hidden, and, like God's sunlight and rain, made open and accessible to all.

Charles Sumner was born in the year 1811. His preparatory studies were pursued in the Boston Latin School. He graduated at the Harvard University, in the year 1830. He entered upon the study of the Law, and at the age of 23, commenced its practice in his native City of Boston. He was instinctively and under all circumstances a scholar. Learning clung to him as naturally as a garment. He was well grounded in the Law, for his legal studies had been very broad and very

deep. Clients and causes poured in upon him. Opportunities for a large and lucrative practice opened up to him, for his reputation and promise had preceded and heralded his entrance upon the profession. But he seemed to share the opinion of Burke that "the law sharpened but did not liberalize the mind," for he voluntarily declined this proffered clientelage. There is but one cause of public interest in the Courts with which I have seen that he, as an advocate, was connected, and that was a cause in which his love for humanity enlisted him. He argued with great power before the Supreme Court of Massachusetts against the constitutionality of separate colored schools.

It was in these days of his early manhood, that he reported and published the Circuit Court decisions of Justice Story. To this labor he was led somewhat by his scholarly and legal tastes, but chiefly by the devoted friendship which he entertained for Justice Story, whose pupil, and, so to speak, younger brother, he had been at the Dane Law School. This friendship, which was germinated and nourished not alone from the affinity between two scholars, but also from the mutual appreciation existing between two gifted and pure men, was imperishably embalmed in a most discriminating and affectionate eulogy pronounced by the pupil upon the teacher, as a jurist, after his death, in connection with Pickering as a scholar, Allston as an artist, and Channing as a philanthropist. In his friendship for Story, as in all things else, was seen the love for the worthy, which animated and guided all his preferences.

Then came a residence of three years abroad, sedu-

lously devoted to study in England and Europe, which still more enriched an already rich scholarship and deepened a love for humanity already absorbing.

Upon his return this man, who had developed into a scholar, a statesman and a philanthropist, spoke, and spoke with tremendous power, in a series of orations delivered chiefly at the various seats of learning throughout the country, the most marked of which were, one on the "True Grandeur of Nations," which advocated with all the force of argument, illustrated from all the wealth of History, that the true aggrandizement of nations was to be found in the walks of peace; one on "Fame and Glory," wherein was enforced the great truth that "no true and permanent fame can be founded except in labors which promote the happiness of mankind; one on the "Law of Human Progress," wherein was set forth in clearest light the doctrine that human institutions gravitate towards the right, and that the successive civilizations have advanced the ideas of men near and still nearer to an accord with that right; and one upon Granville Sharp, wherein were swept together and presented by lips that seemed to have been touched with a live coal from off freedom's own altar, the heroic acts of an English merchant, who, without any special fitness for such a mission, except a heart warmed with a generous and unconquerable love of freedom, by dint of individual will and individual effort, and in spite of tremendous opposition continued through long years, succeeded in having the principle established never to be shaken that when a slave touched the soil of England he was from

that moment forever free. It is in this oration, more than in any other emanation, that the deep and thrilling sympathy of Charles Sumner appears for the slave and for one struggling for right against legalized wrong; and as he follows Granville Sharp through his simple but great life, from his position as an apprentice of a linen draper, down to the time when, without having had the patronage of the so-called great, but by virtue of the good he had accomplished and the wrong he had destroyed, his remains were interred in Westminster Abbey, that shrine of England's untitled nobility, he indicates and foreshadows his own capability for a great career, his own capability to fight giant wrong, without any prospective reward save the approval of conscience, with uncompromising hostility through long years till at last victory for the right should come.

When his name had thus become familiar and endeared to all who loved high principles, there came a troubling to the waters of politics in Massachusetts, which gave the then small band of abolitionists their first Senator from that State. On the 69th ballot Mr. Sumner was elected for a period of six years from the 4th day of March, 1851. Following a precedent set by John Quincy Adams, he addressed to the Legislature a communication accepting the trust they had conferred, and with characteristic boldness and zeal declaring his sympathy with the great movement to restrict slavery within the narrowest constitutional limits, which was then like a ground swell of the ocean commencing to set in among the people of the land. In these words he lays down the rule which as Senator he pledges himself

to follow: "Since politics are simply morals applied "to public affairs, I shall find constant assistance from "those everlasting rules of right and wrong, which are "a law alike to individuals and communities, nay, which "constrain the omnipotent God himself in self-imposed "bonds." And, with this grand text as his guide, he entered upon his career as Senator—a career which was destined to extend over almost a quarter of a century, and to be connected with a struggle which, in results, was to be the most important of our age, in which he was to be a prominent actor and in some respects the leading spirit.

Four years later in Faneuil Hall, he gave fuller utterance to his political creed. Said he on that occasion: "It was the sentiment of that great apostle of freedom, Benjamin Franklin, uttered during the trials of the Revolution, that 'where liberty is there is my country.' In a similar strain I would say, where liberty is there is my party. Such an organization is now happily constituted here in Massachusetts and in all the free States under the name of the Republican party. Fellow citizens, we found now a new party! Its corner stone is freedom; its broad, all sustaining arches are truth, justice and humanity. Like the ancient Roman Capitol, at once a temple and a citadel, it shall be the fit shrine for the genius of American institutions." A grand prophecy, fearfully verified! For though the Republic was convulsed by the shock of hundreds of thousands of opposing combatants, and our soil was drenched from the Potomac to the Mississippi with fraternal blood, while the nation's heart was each day wrung

with fresh agony as her sons on each side by thousands daily fell! Nevertheless the irrepressible, adaptive genius of constitutional liberty was able to preserve and did preserve our free, representative government, severed from the reproach and danger of slavery, purified, transformed into the guardian of impartial freedom—the “temple of free institutions” inviolate—the “citadel” still further fortified.

When he entered the Senate in 1851, the slave influence was an autocracy. It was timidly obeyed in the Executive Mansion, and was dominant in both Houses of Congress, and with few exceptions, with the public press of the country. It not only controlled the National policy, but it was insolent in its apparently confirmed power and was wrathful and resentful towards opposition. It made up in haughty intolerance for its conscious want of rightful strength. But with the bravery of those who attack great numbers sustained only by a living sense of the justice of a cause, he struck blow after blow against this entrenched evil. He portrayed its horrors and its wrongs. He attacked it through History, through political economy, through ethics, and through the Holy Bible. Day after day, month after month and year after year his Philippics resounded through the Senate Chamber against this ramified, thoroughly organized and well nigh nationalized system, whose smile was courted as the passport to political power, whose frown was dreaded as the precursor of a lasting banishment. Well nigh alone he breasted the sentiment of the whole Senate and the political aversion of those in power. How weary must

he sometimes have been, as the assertion of the great doctrines of Human Liberty, and that too in a Republic, fell upon the ears of an audience only to provoke opposition and increase personal bitterness until it came near to obloquy! Who that remembers the fierce opposition which he encountered when he sought to be heard on his Bill "Repealing the Fugitive Slave Law," can fail to remember the courage, the persistence, the resources, which he exhibited in a contest which to the vision of the multitude promised only defeat and disaster. But never faltering, never disheartened he fought on.

In the Senate never did he allow an opportunity to pass to speak for the enslaved. And such words! They had the fervor and faith of the utterances of the Hebrew prophets. They seemed to well up and overflow from a soul filled with a sense of the hideousness of slavery, and with a longing to see all the slaves set free and a determination to accomplish their freedom by so accumulating the arguments that the moral sense of the nation must rouse itself from its apathy and go fearlessly with him.

The most memorable of his Senatorial efforts are three: one of which he entitled "Liberty National, Slavery Sectional," in which he strove to prove, and did prove by the most exhaustive and rich collection of authorities drawn from the fathers, and from the line of argument drawn from the Constitution and the various relative provisions, that the government was one upon the principles and in the interests of freedom, and that the dogma of the supporters of slavery that where the

Constitution went there it carried and protected slavery, was an arrogant assumption. His intense sympathy with the oppressed, and the retribution which he devoutly believed sooner or later attended oppression, he breathed forth in the concluding sentence, borrowed from an Oriental writer: "Beware," said he, "of the "groans of wounded souls; oppress not to the utmost a "single heart, for a solitary sigh has power to upset "the whole world."

The second of his grand Congressional efforts he denominated "The Crime Against Kansas." It was a protest against the repeal of the Ordinance of Freedom known as the Missouri "Compromise." It was more than an argument, though as such it was massive; it was also an impassioned note of warning, addressed to the thoughtful throughout the country, to beware of the aggressions of slavery, and it was a denunciation against slavery big with the threat of its impending overthrow, now that a face-to-face and life-and-death struggle had been precipitated between it and freedom. Listen to his entreaty, remonstrance and confident prediction: "From the depths of my soul," said he, "as a "loyal citizen and as a Senator, I plead, I remonstrate "and protest against the passage of this bill. I struggle against it as against death; but as in death itself, "corruption puts on incorruption and this mortal body "puts on immortality, so from the sting of this "hour I find assurances of that triumph by which "Freedom will be restored to her immortal birthright "in the Republic."

It was for this he received the violence, which, like

that buffet to which more than mortal lips replied "God shall smite thee, thou whited sepulchre," to his other qualities added that last and most irresistible in a great moral cause—that of great personal suffering endured for that cause's sake. It was for this he received the blow which, in the Senate Chamber—the theatre of his prolonged struggles, and destined to be that of his great victory—felled him to the floor. His cause, strong to invincibility before, from that moment took on new strength from the person of its advocate. Thenceforth throughout the world, those who had sorrowed for the slave, won to a Senator thus smitten, by a feeling in which admiration and sympathy were blended, were unconsciously drawn into a more fierce antagonism towards a system which had been the real author of this indignity and cruelty. Thereafter from his lips words of protestation or incitement doubly inflamed, for they of right kindled a zeal which has turned the tide in many a moral conflict, in that they were spoken by one upon whom had been set the seal of persecution, in design wrathful, but in effect a new and higher consecration.

After a sojourn abroad under medical treatment for several years, he was enabled to resume his seat in the Senate. He renewed his unabated warfare in his grandest effort—one which tasked to the utmost, even his moral heroism which he styled the "Barbarism of Slavery." In this effort he assumed the offensive. He attacked slavery from foundation to turret. He arraigned it before the Bar of the Public Opinion of the civilized world and charged it not only with being a

system of unmitigated wrongs, but as blighting and degrading the civilization which tolerated it. His other animadversions had been bitter, this was gall; they had been condemnatory, this was almost an anathema; they had been directed largely to considerations which would restrict slavery and prevent its further expansion in the new States and Territories, this one sought by a thorough exposition of its vices, its violence and its enormities—of its disastrous consequences to slaves, to masters and to commonwealths, to overwhelm and uproot it. There was and there could be no answer either on the score of justice or of statesmanship to this terrific assault. Its boldness was electric. Ringing like a clarion through the land, it did much to multiply and unite the opponents of slavery, and animate and stimulate them to a wide-spread effort extending through the free States which, made the party for freedom determined, aggressive and triumphant. It was at this point in his struggle when, either from the calm and protracted reflections of a sick-chamber, or from an observation of outward events, he became imbued with a greatly augmented confidence in immediate success and he not only continued to be a champion, but he became a herald of victory.

Meanwhile his cause which he had presented solely in its moral aspects, had, from reasons of expediency as well as of justice, been adopted by a great political national party. Many, who had not been attracted by the inherent merit of principles when they had nothing else to recommend them, at once espoused them, now that they had become the tenets of a great and growing

organization, marching on to victory at the polls. It is thus that God in his Providence secures His results among men. He allies principles to human selfishness and maintains and brings to triumph pure and unselfish doctrines by bringing to their support the baser passions. What the principles of the early Abolitionists lost by this alliance in disinterestedness, they gained in coarser but effective force. The religious creed, or, perhaps better, the humanitarian principles of those who supported Birney, thereby consciously finding political ostracism, had become the platform upon which unnumbered candidates expected to be elected to honorable and lucrative positions. And so the campaign of 1860 was made by the Republican party throughout the North, by some who fought against slavery for rights sake, by others from a sort of local patriotism, and by others still for the loaves and fishes of office. Thus constituted, it was successful. Surely such a party needed some quickening, some transformation, some baptism before it could be truly qualified for any great work for the nation or humanity.

This capacitating and ennobling force came, and came unexpectedly, from a terrible civil war. For slavery, unwisely for itself, had determined to risk all upon the arbitrament of the sword. The opening of actual hostilities struck the Northern mind like a sudden blow. It produced consternation. Then followed the perception that the States divided would be States degenerate, petty principalities, an easy prey to their own jealousies or to foreign ambition. As the proportions of the contest enlarged, came the stimulus which ever

attends a gigantic undertaking. There was, too, the absorbing interest which fathers, brothers and sons, fallen or fighting in a cause, could alone create. Soon the enormous expenditure made success a growing necessity. All this gave to moral ideas a supremacy which ordinarily they do not possess in national affairs, and, added to the influence of those who watched events chiefly to see how the great interests of humanity were advanced or retarded, opened up an opportunity for the acquittance by the nation of what had been really the nation's sin. Thus, partly from selfish motives, partly from much higher ones, was brought about the abolition of slavery throughout the United States. In this memorable contest, what part did Charles Sumner take? When you contemplate his lifelong principles you can tell in advance what measures he urged, and with what spirit he urged them.

A civil war is a terrible ordeal, not only for the State, but for individuals. Not only is the destiny of the nation made to hang upon the result of a battle or a campaign, not only are the bands of civil society loosened, and the ordinary restraints upon the citizens relaxed; but the prominent personages in the Cabinet and in the field have pressed upon them duties which test to the utmost their intellectual and moral calibre, for they are compelled to solve questions and settle upon movements and lines of policy of momentous consequence to the community, with little opportunity for mature deliberation and none for aid outside their own genius and spirit. This was peculiarly true in our civil war on the part of the North; for there was demanded not only military

skill of high order, not only administrative ability capable of providing the means of vast and continued military movements, but the spirit of the people had to be kept up to the point which allowed of immense personal sacrifices for the common good, and also the question of slavery had to be dealt with wisely and boldly. Mr. Sumner developed no special ability in matters purely military. He was excelled by many in matters of administration. But as a man in whom the people trusted for high and sustaining impulse, he was unsurpassed. His zeal glowed and radiated, like the light, throughout the whole North. The earnestness of his convictions, then, above all other times, wrought conviction in others. His prophecies rekindled the hopes of the desponding and imparted courage to those who were ready to take counsel of their fears. His enthusiasm became intenser as the emergencies became more alarming. Until by virtue of his never-flinching advocacy of the right, in the midst of no matter what dangers, he had accorded to him, both among the people and in the nation's counsels, a prominence which mere intellectual greatness could not have attained. From the beginning to the end of the war he represented in his words and acts a disinterestedness of motive and a loftiness of devotion to country which aided much in securing ultimate success.

On the subject of slavery he never wavered. He was an early and incessant advocate of emancipation. He pressed it as a measure of the clearest right and, therefore, as in the highest and most enduring sense, expedient. He also urged it as a means of national

defense, founded upon reasons which evidenced its practical wisdom when tested by the doctrine of immediate material consequences. Many men contributed to this measure, and the official responsibility of the act of emancipation finally rested upon a president whose austere simplicity and integrity of life, together with his martyrdom, has given him an immediate and high position in the world's estimation; but of all the men who contributed to bring it about, no one brought to bear an enthusiasm more truly sacred or a faith more implicit or, a force which in the aggregate, was more valuable when judged by the rare combination of high qualities from which it was derived, or the effectiveness with which it was exerted. When the storm which darkened the nation's sky was thickest, his sole fear was lest an opportunity for stupendous good might be unimproved and pass never to return. Thus the war with its terrors and horrors afforded an opportunity for accomplishing for humanity that which argument and eloquence and learning had only helped to render possible. So when one sums up his labors during the war, it should be said, that he stands forth as, even now, a historic character remarkable for the lofty tone which he imparted to discussion, and for the elevated aim which he helped to give to measures and as being one of the few who, with a union of States assailed to the very verge of disruption, and, when it was felt that a mistake would have been a calamity, not alone to our government, but to free institutions everywhere, never for one moment countenanced a compromise of what he deemed right, who was sleep-

less in his vigilance for the interests of humanity, and as one who advocated and helped to carry through the emancipation of slavery because it was justice to the slave, and was right in the sight of God. He was great in his prolonged advocacy of principles which at first were treated as fanaticisms, but which were so strong in their justice that they successfully defied and finally overthrew the stoutest wrong. He was greater when events had culminated so that a nation's deliverance from overwhelming danger, was to be determined according to the wisdom of the measures adopted, and he, undismayed, still clung to the everlasting and unchanging law of right.

His attitude prior to the war was stern opposition to all compromises with slavery; during the war a heroic devotion to Liberty and the Union, sustained by an unfaltering trust in the triumph of both. Since the war his efforts have been to secure by Constitution and statute complete protection to the freedmen, to invest them practically with all the rights which inhere in the man and in the citizen, and to give guaranties for the enjoyment of those rights. There are, however, two measures which he has advocated which deserve special mention. I refer to the "Civil Rights Bill" and the "Resolution to erase from the National Battle Flags the names of the inscribed battles in which the Union armies had been victorious."

His Civil Rights Bill may be summed up in this: It gives to all races and classes the full and equal enjoyment of all the municipal public rights. It is a most unjust criticism to characterize this bill as trenching upon or meddling with social rights. For there is no social

equality in a common right to ride in a public conveyance, or to stop at a public hotel, any more than there is in the common right to breathe the vital air. It leaves social intercourse to be regulated entirely by individual taste. There is not only humanity but immense sagacity underlying this bill. The sooner Federal statutes unalterably fix these great common rights, the denial of which is desired only by reason of prejudices bequeathed by slavery, and thereby secure the harmless well-being, comfort and progress of the formerly proscribed and oppressed, the sooner will the energies of our community be devoted to the common purpose of developing our material resources and attaining the prosperity which, with harmonious and wisely directed action on our part, is so clearly attainable. It should, also, be borne in mind that, while these rights should be firmly secured by the sanctions of Federal law, it should be the object on the part of those in whose behalf the law is enacted, by the acquirement of thorough education, by industrious and economical habits, by the attainment of distinction in the various vocations and professions and personal standing and weight in all the relations of life, and, above all, by the manifestation of a spirit of kindness towards all, to render the law easy of enforcement and, at no distant day, unnecessary.

His resolution to erase from our flags the names of Union victories elicited much censure and provoked the condemnation of the Legislature of his own State, which, happily, was revoked on the last day of his attendance in the Senate and three days before his death. In this resolution, too, was not only the spirit of philanthropy, but also the sagacity of the statesman. The flag

of a nation is the symbol of the nation's power and honor and glory. It is a common emblem—in peace the protection, in war the inspiration—of the whole country. When, therefore, a great civil insurrection, in no matter how indefensible a cause, has been decisively put down and an assured peace has been attained, I think the government would wisely remove from its common ensign all memorials of victories of one section over another, and, so far as possible, all traces of fraternal struggles. While with a firm hand it should guard all from oppression and proscription, and should secure to all the unrestricted opportunities for individual happiness and progress, it should with equal consideration preserve all from needless humiliation. The unsectional, unpartisan character of Charles Sumner's purposes, his manly independence and his enlarged and comprehensive range of view nowhere appear more conspicuously or more commandingly than in this act, where in advance of, and even against the public opinion of the country he sprang forward to do this swift justice to those who had for a lifetime been his bitterest opponents. It showed the stretch of his vision and the height of his motives.

What a fitting attitude for the conclusion of his beneficent life! In one hand he holds a statute, which removed from the former slave the last impediments in the way of his equal access through all public means to the public comforts and enjoyments, the public ameliorations and advantages of life: in the other hand he holds a resolution which sought to blot from the national flag all reminders of triumph over those who fought that slavery might be continued. These two measures together would make the nation just, considerate, wise and generous. If their spirit could be

cordially adopted and acted upon, it would eradicate all bitterness and would leave us, as a community, with protection for all, with offense towards none, in our feelings, as we are in our interests, indissolubly united.

The presence and touch of death came unexpectedly to Mr. Sumner, as they come to all. There had been unusual joy at the ~~re~~cission of the censure of Massachusetts; unusual fatigue at extraordinary labors in the Senate Chamber, when there was a calm gathering of his garments about him, and midst a hush which had fallen upon a whole people, he fell asleep and henceforth lives with God, and in the minds of the good of this age and all future ages.

In dauntless opposition to wrong on broadest grounds he is most resembled by Burke. In scholarship he outranks the younger Adams and Everett, and in an intimate knowledge of what might be termed the Literature of Philanthropy, all modern Statesmen. His efforts in breadth of mere intellect were not equal to those of Webster, and in logical subtlety fell short of those of Calhoun; but they showed a commanding intellect, to a distinguishing degree comprehensive and logical. His statesmanship was of a high order when judged with reference to its historic wisdom, its forecast or its adaptation of means to ends, and is well nigh solitary in its preeminence when viewed as illustrating a broad, sleepless love of mankind, insisted on with the valor of chivalry and the self-devotion of the martyrs.

About the same time two men emerged into public life, and each, after having been an actor in stirring events for about the period of twenty-five years, prematurely worn out with his labors, found repose in

death. The one became Emperor of France; the other was an American Senator. The aim of one was personal aggrandizement; that of the other the advancement of humanity. The great effort of the one was to found an hereditary dynasty; that of the other to free the slave. The one after seeing his dynasty melt away before the wrath of a people resuming sovereignty for themselves, died in exile, crownless and cheerless; the other lived to see four millions of slaves set free and enfranchised and descended to the grave cheered by their gratitude, beloved by all his countrymen and revered throughout the world. Chiselhurst will forever suggest the frailty of princely prerogatives and the sadness and mockery of the splendor of titled power; while from Mount Auburn will be suggested the immortal vigor and freshness of renown won in struggles for our fellow-men, and the grandeur and pathos which can be crowded into the life of a Republican Citizen.

When that cortege witnessed by that hundred thousand and sorrowing fellow-citizens accompanied his mortal remains to his simple grave, they did but give expression to the sense of personal bereavement which saddened every heart in the nation, and did but anticipate and attest the verdict of history. Great in his love of man, great in his obedience to the right, he has entered upon an immortality of fame. Like the labors of Howard, and the songs of Burns, the utterances of Sumner will kindle tender and grateful emotions in the hearts of men so long as human hearts continue to beat. In almost his own language on an occasion of heartfelt tribute, be it said: let the politician and time server stand aside, a pure patriot, the friend of humanity, the fearless vindicator of the Right has gone to his reward.

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